



Student Questionnaires

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What is a Student Questionnaire?

A student questionnaire is a short list of questions – often one to two pages with space for student replies - that is administered to gather information about the students in your class. These questions could include topics such as student major and minor, information about student interests and the student as a person, and /or are about student background/experience with the subject of the course.

Instructors can develop these questionnaires to share the first week of class as an initial way to get to know their students, to begin to create classroom community through rapport, and to better understand the goals, background, and personalities of the people taking their class.

Learning more about students not only increases rapport, but studies show that when students have good rapport with instructors, they will feel more supported in learning, will feel welcome to ask questions about course material, and will have better outcomes in the course (Wilson et al., 2010; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Meyers 2009).

Another benefit is that instructors can revisit saved student responses, search and reference those responses during the semester. This can help you connect each new topic with your students, continue to have a clear understanding of the audience you are addressing, and the needs you are meeting with your course material.

Introduction

A student questionnaire is an easy, effective tool you can create and implement in your class that can transform your interactions with your class, decrease student anxiety, and yield insights into the needs and backgrounds of the students in your section.

Student questionnaires can be used in a variety of ways, and you can decide whether you want to just use one at the beginning of the semester or whether you might want to extend the practice with more targeted questionnaires throughout the semester. The simplest use is a powerful tool for welcoming students and creating an atmosphere of trust and rapport, the beginnings of a classroom community. Some instructors have found that they can begin with a questionnaire to get to know their students, include a section in which students talk about prior knowledge and set goals for the semester. They might then administer a mid-semester questionnaire to check in on progress toward the goals, and conclude the semester with reflections on what the student initially hoped to learn and their progress toward this goal. This second method can be used as a complement to Ungrading or Contract Grading (Blum, 2020; Katopodis & Davidson, 2020).



Implementation Basics

1. Decide what information you would like to gather about the students in your course, review questions from below or other resources, edit those and/or write your own questions.
2. Decide whether you want to administer this questionnaire in class or outside of class. The questionnaire can be put online (linked on the Course page on Canvas or link given to students during class) or can be printed and given to students to complete. If you choose to, you can have students fill out the questionnaire in class depending on how many questions you would like students to answer.
3. Decide if you will also answer the questionnaire and share your responses.
4. Decide how you plan to use the information; if you will share results at the beginning with students formally, in an ice-breaker activity, or spread it throughout the semester.

Implementation Variations

You can include questions about student background and material, in multiple different modes –

1. The Affective level of their previous learning, their personal experience learning this subject matter in the past, and their feelings about it as they approach this semester, which can help in supporting their learning,
2. Questions about their background with specific concepts or areas, like concept inventories, which will help you know how to approach the material most productively for the people in the course.

Here are a few examples of variations you can use, or even combine -

- Questionnaire Focus on Personal Information for Building Rapport
 - What name would you like me to call you? What are your pronouns?
 - What is your previous experience with [topic of the class]? This can be informal or formal experience.
 - What is a fun fact about you?
 - Is there anything else you would like me to know?
- Questionnaire on Subject Background information.
 - Have you taken any other classes in this discipline before?
 - What are you hoping to learn in this class?
 - What skills would you like help working on with this subject this semester?
- Supporting Neurodiverse Students – Your neurodiverse students and your class at large can benefit from a question asking them to reflect on how they learn best.
 - How do you think you learn best? Can you give me an example?
 - What is an avoidable distractor or thing that takes away from your learning experience that you'd like me to know about?
- Goal-setting Questionnaire that has a question or questions for goal setting, in which case this is a tool you can revisit at midterm and at the end of the semester for metacognitive self-reflection, or perhaps as part of a contract grading tool.
 - What are your goals with the topics listed in the syllabus for this semester?
 - What skills do you want to build through your work in this class this semester?
 - What grade are you contracting for? Note that this will be revisited at midterm and just before Finals.



Frequently Asked Questions

1. *Students want to know if this is graded.* A: This doesn't need to be graded, but you can choose whether you'd like to give credit for returned questionnaires as an early semester required assignment. Giving credit for the questionnaire may help to incentivize completion of the questionnaire.
2. *I have a 200 student Lecture course. How would this help me?* A: Large courses benefit a great deal with this one small tool. As with a smaller course, you might also complete the questionnaire and either discuss details about yourself during an icebreaking activity the first week of class, or post your own answers somewhere on the course page for students to read. One benefit of doing this is that it establishes rapport both between yourself and your students, and if you use this in an icebreaker activity, between your students. Both of these ways of building rapport create a sense of caring, and if you choose to include questions about student prior knowledge of your subject, you have a rich resource to tap into throughout the semester when a student needs help, or you want to understand why a student is having difficulty.
3. *I teach ESL and I'm wondering if it would be good practice for me to do one of these to share with my students, too?* A: The student questionnaire would be a perfect introductory tool, and perhaps could be extended to become the introduction to both creating a classroom community where everyone feels known, and to possible assignments that could grow out of that information – students interviewing each other, for example. This would create a strong starting ground for the work of an ESL class.
4. *I teach a large course online, and I'm not sure whether this would help me. Could it?*
Administering a required Student Questionnaire, and sharing that same information about yourself at the beginning of the semester and then keeping those in a file to refer to throughout your semester actually is a proven technique that helps to not only establish an Instructor Presence – a sense of who you are in the class, and a sense that you care about who your students are.
Additionally, using a student questionnaire in your course, even if it is quite large, and whether you are teaching an asynchronous or synchronous version, will help you to immediately develop a resource you can turn to in synchronous online sessions to shape content and examples to the needs of the students in the course, and for an asynchronous course, to both establish a caring and welcoming atmosphere and also to have a resource at your fingertips that you can check to better understand what a student has not covered in previous courses, constraints the student is facing, and even information to help you reach out to students if you need to check in on someone.
With the information you collect with that single beginning of the semester student questionnaire, your online course will not be an experience of you teaching to faceless names on a roster, or the dreaded silent boxes in a synchronous class session. You will have an idea of who your students are, why they are taking your course, and what you can discuss to make your material more relevant to them.

Other Resources

- Step One of a multi-step plan to foster inclusivity and belonging. This multi-step plan clearly describes steps instructors can take to foster a sense of belonging and encourage students to be able to be vulnerable in class. Of course, the more vulnerable, the more able to ask questions and seek help for the things they don't know how to ask. This resource includes links to four "pathways," or step by step plans to help you create a classroom environment that establishes inclusivity and belonging, disrupts traditional hierarchies, and more:

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<https://instructionalmoves.gse.harvard.edu/inclusivity-and-belonging/step-1-getting-to-know-your-students>

- This at-a-glance resource lets you get started incorporating practices for a more inclusive classroom, and includes information you may want to gather using a Student Questionnaire:

<https://teaching.cornell.edu/teaching-resources/assessment-evaluation/inclusion-accessibility-accommodation/building-inclusive-1>

- Example Student Questionnaire questions to consider:

<https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/classroomclimate/strategies/individuals.html>

- A resource on empathy and rapport:

<https://www.csc.edu/media/website/content-assets/documents/pdf/tlpec/Empathy-and-Rapport.pdf>

- This quick-start resource from Carnegie Mellon's Eberly Center gives examples of questions you might include in a student questionnaire about your students, and then gives examples of how you might extend the use of questionnaires throughout your course;

<https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/classroomclimate/strategies/individuals.html>

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